Vignettes

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Vignettes

Nicholas Jenkins & Sarah Noone

When used in social research, vignettes may be defined as compact scenarios designed to elicit data from research participants or to encapsulate themes and findings from the research process. As this definition implies, the vignette technique is highly versatile. Vignettes may be used to depict purely hypothetical scenarios, or reflect the lived experiences of research participants. They may be used to provide a snapshot of a single scenario of interest in the research process, or to provide a more extensive exploration of a series of connected situations. Vignettes may be presented to research audiences using a rage of mediums including literary writings, audio recordings, interactive webpages, short film and short theatre. Drawing on examples, this chapter seeks to provide a broad overview of the use of vignettes in social research as well as highlight practical issues and methodological considerations associated with their use.

Practical reasons for using vignettes in social research

Depending on the aims of the study and the topic under investigation, utilising the vignette technique can bring a number of practical benefits to the research process. First, researchers have found vignettes to be particularly suitable for collecting empirical data on behaviours that are difficult to observe first-hand. Sensitive issues such as illicit drug use, underage sex, and physical and sexual assault for instance, are of considerable interest to contemporary social researchers and policy-makers alike, yet direct observation of these phenomena would be unlikely to be considered ethical by most research committees. By developing true-to-life scenarios that involve fictionalised protagonists, presenting them to study participants and inviting their responses, researchers have been able to use vignettes to generate insights into how participants might behave when confronted with similar situations in the real-world. McKeganey et al. (1995), for example, used the vignette technique to explore injecting drug users' preparedness to share injecting equipment. Their hypothesis, based on their previous research, was that drug users would be more willing to share injecting equipment with close friends and with sexual partners compared with people they did not know. To explore this hypothesis, six short, written vignettes were developed by the research team depicting typical lending and borrowing situations. These vignettes were then embedded within a cross-sectional survey of injecting drug users across the city of Glasgow, Scotland. The data collected from the 505 injecting drug users in response to the vignettes highlighted that the degree of social distance was a statistically significant variable in predicting users' willingness to share injective equipment (at the $P<0.001$ threshold), even amongst users who did not report having shared injecting equipment themselves within the past six months. Based on participants' responses to the vignettes, McKeganey et al. concluded that preparedness to share injecting equipment remained high within the city's drug using population, and that continuing to make injecting equipment widely available was a necessary, if unpopular, intervention if *actual* equipment sharing was to be tackled effectively.

Second, the vignette technique is highly suited to exploring research participants' views, opinions, attitudes and experiences in ways that do not require them to disclose details of their own behaviour and their own personal lives (unless, of course, they make the conscious decision to do so). By devising hypothetical scenarios that *project* dilemmas, choices and behaviours onto fictionalised protagonists, the vignette technique has been used to engage participants in talking about 'sensitive' issues without fear of self-incrimination or negative social judgement. Barter and Renold (2000), for example, used vignettes to explore the incidence and the impact of violence amongst children and young people within residential care homes for young people in the UK. Adopting a qualitative approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with residents of 14 care homes, during which

participants were first asked to comment on their own understandings and experiences of violence, before being asked to respond to a series of hypothetical vignettes depicting violence situations within care home settings. One of the primary intentions behind the use of vignettes was to provide '*an opportunity for young people to comment on types of violence they had not encountered as well as violence they had experienced, but felt too uncomfortable to disclose through direct discussion*' (Barter and Renold 2000, p. 313). Used in this fashion, vignettes can thus provide study participants with a degree of practical and psychological safety.

Third, the vignette technique can provide an effective means of comparing perceptions and experiences of different populations, as well as amongst the same populations over time. Ryan et al. (1995) for example, used vignettes as part of a five-year qualitative longitudinal cohort study of trainee social workers in Victoria, Australia, as students moved from formal degree-level training to professional practice. Study participants were interviewed every six months during the five years, whereupon each practitioner was asked to describe *critical incidents* they had experienced in their own practice (over the six months prior to being interviewed) as well as to comment on a series of case vignettes developed by the research team. The use of vignettes in this fashion enabled the researchers to collect 'baseline data' on trainee social workers' knowledge and perceptions at the outset of the study, as well as provide a standardised set of professional scenarios independent of participants' own direct experience, upon which all study participants could comment upon.

Forth, the vignette technique can serve as a powerful and accessible medium for communicating research themes and findings to academic and non-academic audiences. This can have particular advantages for social researchers in an era where generating *impact* from the research process is becoming increasingly emphasised by research councils and other major funding bodies. From this tradition, researchers have used vignettes as a method for translating complex themes, issues and recommendations into succinct visual, audio and written scenarios that can be made readily available to a variety of audiences. For example, drawing on principles associated with public sociology (Burawoy, 2005a, 2005b), Jenkins et al. (2016) developed theatrical vignettes that sought to communicate the everyday lives and challenges of families living with early onset dementia (diagnosis of progressive neurocognitive disorder before the age of 65). Qualitative data on families' lived experiences were generated through an *image theatre* workshop (Boal, 1995) facilitated within a specialist support service for families living with early onset dementia in Scotland, UK. Using professional actors and directed by theatre practitioners, themes, images and group discussions generated during the workshop were used to develop four vignettes. These vignettes were filmed using a 'black-box' theatre and produced using

time-lapse photography and other editing techniques, in an attempt to convey a sense of what living with early onset dementia was like for families on a day-to-day basis.

Whilst vignettes may bring a number of practical benefits, the manner in which they are used differs notably across qualitative and quantitative traditions.

The vignette technique in quantitative research

The use of vignettes within quantitative social research has been developed through two distinct yet complimentary quasi-experimental research designs: factorial surveys and discrete choice experiments (DCEs). First developed by Peter H. Rossi and colleagues, the factorial survey involves study participants (*decision-makers*) being presented with true-to-life vignettes (*factorial objects*), usually as part of a written questionnaire or a structured interview (Lauder, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Wallander, 2009; Wallander, 2012). Participants are then asked to respond to the vignettes using a pre-designed scale or by selecting actions from a list of options prepared in advance by the researcher (see Box 1). What makes the factorial survey distinct from other survey techniques is that key variables (*factors*) depicted within the vignettes are subjected to randomised variation. This has the effect of producing multiple variations of the original vignette to which different decision-makers are exposed. As Taylor (2006: 1195) argues, it is the '*randomization within the vignettes and in the allocation of vignettes to respondents [that] gives the factorial survey the robustness of an experimental method*'. The process is designed to enable researchers to explore, scientifically, the extent to which random variation in the factors of interest to the researchers can be used to predict variation in participants' decision-making processes. As both Taylor (2006) and Wallander (2009; 2012) highlight, the factorial survey has been employed across a range of fields within applied social research; most notably in criminal justice but also in research into child protection and ageing amongst others. Whilst this is the case, factorial survey methodology remains a relatively lesser known design within the quantitative social research tradition and is rarely described in detail within contemporary methods textbooks (Wallander, 2009).

Box 1: Example of the vignette technique in factorial surveys

Your client is a [65 / 74 / 86 / 93] year old [male / female] who has [eczema / diabetes / severe arthritis / had a minor stroke] [he / she] [is very confused and/can sometimes be confused and/shows no confusion and/NULL] [is placid / is demanding / is aggressive / is often violent]

[He / She] is looked after by a daughter who [copes well although she / finds the role stressful and /is under immense stress and/ NULL] [abuses alcohol/ has a mental illness/ is financially dependent/ has unrealistic expectations]

The daughter admits that she [roughly handled him / shook him by the shoulders / punished him with a slap / hit him in the face with a fist] on [one / two / three / many] occasions

[The client wishes action to be taken / The client consents to an investigation / The client does not wish action to be taken/ NULL]

[The daughter will be devastated if an investigation is initiated / The daughter will give up the caring role if an investigation is initiated / The daughter will make a formal complaint if an investigation is initiated / NULL]

[A range of support services are currently available / There is a six month waiting list for services / There are no available day care or respite places / NULL]

To what extent do you perceive this to be abuse?

Not Abuse	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Abuse

How likely would you be to refer this case for investigation?

Not Likely	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Very Likely

Source: Killick and Taylor (2011, p. 819)

Whilst sharing many characteristics with factorial surveys, the use of vignettes within discrete choice experiments [DCEs] is designed to explore how participants assign value to particular goods and services through participants' stated preferences. Informed by random utility theory, DCEs seek to ascribe value to goods and services based on their attributes and the benefit users derive from them (de Bekker-Grob, Ryan, & Gerard, 2012; Ryan, 2004). Whilst DCEs are more commonly found in economic and market-based research, the emphasis on ensuring *best value* in public sector service provision is leading to increasing interest in DCEs within applied social research, especially in health and social care (e.g. Miani et al, 2016; Tinelli, 2016).

When deployed within DCE designs, vignettes take the form of short hypothetical scenarios which invite study participants to choose between mutually exclusive (discrete) *choices*. This approach assumes that, when presented with different courses of action, participants will choose the option that maximises the potential for benefit (see Box 2). Thus, by exposing participants to a series of vignettes, the researcher is able to identify attributes that are valued highly by participants, in addition to what participants may be willing to sacrifice in order to obtain them.

Box 2: Example of the vignette technique in discrete choice experiments

The card below provides information about a hypothetical patient with a diagnosed case of Hepatitis C. After reviewing their case given the information below, would you recommend this patient to initiate treatment?

Patient Information	
Gender	Male
Age	30
BMI	32kg/m2
History of drug and/or alcohol abuse	Past history of drug and/or alcohol abuse
Living Arrangements	Patient has stable living arrangements
Social support network	Patient has no social-support network
Dependants	Patient has dependants who need support
Patient's motivation	Patient has reservations about treatment due to cultural/ethnic background
Clinical results	
HCV genotype	2
Stage of liver fibrosis	F3
Haemoglobin (anaemia)	8.5-10g/di
Platelet count	80 000 – 100 000/mm3
White cells count/neutropenia	<500/mm3
Co-morbidities	
Psychological disorders	Ongoing episodes of psychosis, currently under treatment
Other co-morbidities	Type-1 Diabetes

○ **Yes, I would recommend this patient to initiate treatment**

○ **No, I would not recommend this patient to initiate treatment**

Source: Miani et al. (2016, p. 63)

Whether the vignette technique is deployed within factorial surveys or discrete choice experiments, the method is intended to simulate everyday scenarios in order to obtain accurate indications of how participants would behave if confronted with similar situations in real-world settings. For this reason, it is imperative that situations, protagonists and choice options described within vignettes are perceived by participants as plausible, as failure to include the most salient factors, attributes and decision options within the vignettes will result in a decrease in the explanatory power of the findings. Taylor (2006) and Killick and Taylor (2012) suggest conducting systematic reviews and consulting expert panels to help ensure the plausibility of vignettes when used in factorial surveys and Coast et al. (2012) suggest conducting preliminary qualitative research can be effective in enhancing attribute development when devising DCEs.

A key risk when using the vignette technique in factorial surveys and DCEs is the potential for research participants to give *socially desirable* (as opposed to valid) responses; meaning that participants may select courses of action in vignette scenarios that reflect what participants think *should* happen as opposed to what they believe *would* happen in real life (Hughes, 1998). This can have a negative impact on the ability to predict accurately participants' real-world behaviours. As such, quantitative social researchers using the vignette technique are encouraged to be highly vigilant in distinguishing between participants' positive beliefs and normative judgements when conducting factorial surveys (see Jasso, 2006). In addition to socially desirable responses, some researchers have suggested that participants may use vignettes as opportunities to '*flirt with risky behaviours at no personal cost'* (Mckeganey et al., 1995, p. 1259).

In addition to *socially desirable* responses, researchers also need to be mindful of the risk of *vignette fatigue*. Vignette fatigue occurs when participants become over-burdened with vignette stimuli, which can in turn result in participants providing inaccurate or poorly considered responses. This is an important consideration as, in both factorial surveys and DCEs, participants are typically presented with multiple vignettes during a single data collection session. Whilst this is the case, the point at which *vignette fatigue* is likely to set in will be dependent on a variety of factors, including the level of detail within the vignettes and the characteristics of study participants.

The vignette technique in qualitative research (data collection)

In contrast to the use of vignettes in quantitative research, the vignette technique in qualitative data collection is not driven by a desire to predict participants' real-world behaviours and decision-making. As one of the founders of the qualitative approach to using vignettes, Janet Finch (1987, p. 113), argues: '*[i]t is in the area of the relationship between belief and action that I see the biggest danger in the mis-use of vignettes*'. This is because vignettes, however detailed and sophisticated they may be, tend to be viewed by qualitative researchers as only ever able to provide partial insights into real-world behaviours. In contrast, the use of vignettes within qualitative data collection tends to be driven more by a desire to explore the '*socially situated nature'* (Hughes, 1998, p. 394) of human cognition and motor-social behaviour.

In the wake of the *cultural turn*, Finch argued that social attitudes are contingent upon the social and cultural contexts in which they are expressed and, as such, cannot be considered independently of them. The vignette technique, Finch argued, can thus be used by researchers to provide participants with hypothetical contexts in which they can form and express normative positions. This, Finch argued, is in

contrast to traditional survey techniques, which require participants to express beliefs and values 'in a vacuum' (Finch, 1987, p. 106). Since Finch first articulated this approach, the assumption that meaning-making is '*situationally specific'* (Finch, 1987, p. 106) has been at the centre of qualitative approaches to vignette-based data collection, particularly when the technique is deployed within ethnographic and phenomenological studies.

Given this divergent emphasis, the practice of using vignettes in qualitative data collection tends to differ from quantitative approaches in a number of key respects. First, the vignette technique tends to be employed within in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews and in focus groups as opposed to written questionnaires and structured interviews. This format enables researchers to ask open-ended questions of their participants around the vignettes, such as "*What do you think is going on here*?" or "*What do you think will happen next*?" (see Box 3). Such questioning is designed to enable participants to respond to the vignettes on their own terms, rather than via rating scales and discrete choice sets. Thus, data collection typically occurs through a discussion between participants and the researcher of the scenario being presented. Given this approach, emphasis is rarely placed on ensuring reliability in participants' responses to vignette stimuli, as responses tend to be understood as being, at least in part, a product of the researcher-participant relationship (Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2002).

Second, vignettes when used in qualitative data collection are often more detailed and elaborate compared to those used in quantitative research designs. Whilst vignettes used in factorial surveys and DCEs may be shorter than six sentences in length, vignettes designed for qualitative data collection may be several times longer and typically presented to participants via a series of stages (developments). This approach is designed to facilitate in-depth discussion of the situations being investigated, as well as to explore how responses to the latter stages of the vignette may be informed by participants' interpretations of earlier developments.

Third, given the more detailed nature of the vignettes and more extensive discussion involved, qualitative researchers tend to present participants with fewer vignettes than participants in quantitative studies are typically exposed to. Finch (1987) recommends no more than four complex vignettes (i.e. vignettes with a maximum of three developments each) be used during a single qualitative interview.

Box 3: Example of the vignette technique in qualitative interviewing

Injectors and the inside
Page Text

1 Injectors and the inside

2 Ben has been injecting scag (heroin) for three years. His girlfriend Jo hates the thought of Ben injecting and he is now on a methadone script. They are serious about each other and making plans to move in together. Ben has shared his works in the past.

3 Ben and Jo don't want children. When they go to bed together and have sex, what protection, if any, do you think they will use?

4 Jo and Ben used condoms when they first started to sleep together but now Jo takes the contraceptive pill.

5 One day Ben bumps into his good friend Paul. They go for a drink and Paul suggests that they get money together to score some scag. Later they break into a house and sell the stolen stuff to one of Paul's friends. By the time they find a dealer and get back to Paul's flat it is past midnight. After all their efforts they are both dying for a hit. Paul tells Ben that he doesn't have any clean works left and they don't know of anyone nearby who might have some spare works.
What do you think would realistically happen in this situation?

Source: Hughes (1998, p. 395-396)

One of the key methodological considerations when using vignettes in qualitative data collection is what O'Dell et al. (2012) refer to as 'the problem of interpretation'. In other words, if qualitative researchers are *not* to interpret participants' responses to vignette stimuli as proxy indicators of their real-world behaviours, how *should* participants' responses be interpreted? Different solutions to this problem have been proposed within the qualitative methods literature. Jenkins et al. (2010), for example, argue that the dichotomy between belief and action in relation to vignettes is unhelpful, as participants' responses to vignette stimuli can be interpreted as real-world actions in their own right (as opposed to proxy indicators for what happens outside of the interview setting). By exploring how participants engage in acts of *perceptual orientation* (Schutz, 1967) and employ *systems of relevance* (Schutz, 1970) to make sense of vignette scenarios, researchers can thus observe *real-world* decision-making in action. Taking a different, yet complementary approach, O'Dell et al. (2012) draw upon Hermans' dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001, 2002) to explore the ways in which participants move between *I-positions* when making sense of vignette scenarios; for example, exploring the ways in which participants may identify with, and distance themselves from, vignette protagonists. In so doing, O'Dell et al. argue, vignettes can be used to explore the various facets of participants' sense of self. Whilst Jenkins et al. (2010) and O'Dell et al. (2012) draw upon different frameworks to develop their methodologies, both approaches see what is occurring *within* the interview situation itself as the primary focus of investigation, rather than what participants may or may not do outside of it.

Whilst there are many differences in the use of vignettes in qualitative versus quantitative data collection, there are also similarities. Ensuring vignettes are perceived by participants as plausible,

managing socially desirable responses and managing the risk of vignette fatigue, for example, are all practical considerations highlighted in the qualitative methods literature. An additional consideration when using vignettes in qualitative research arises, however, when participants are left feeling that they have given the 'wrong' answer, if vignette scenarios develop in a manner contrary to their expectations (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Jenkins et al., 2010).

The vignette technique in qualitative research (data analysis)

Whilst the vignette technique has been developed as a means of collecting qualitative data, the method has also been used as a means of analysing and representing qualitative data. This approach draws upon literary and arts-based approaches to qualitative inquiry, in particular the approach advocated by Ely et al. (1997), who define vignettes as:

> '… compact sketches that can be used to introduce characters, foreshadow events and analysis to come, highlight particular findings, or summarise a particular theme or issue in analysis and interpretation' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 70).

When used for such purposes, the primary aim of the vignette technique is to highlight aspects of the research process in ways that invite audiences to experience them *vicariously* (Ely et al., 1997; Humphreys, 2005). In this fashion, vignettes can serve as a tool for placing audiences in the shoes of either the researcher or research participants, so as to gain a more *authentic* understanding of the research process or the phenomenon under investigation. This can have the effect of helping researchers to make their data 'come alive', by bringing research audiences closer to a direct experiencing of the issues under investigation and by engaging audiences' capacities for empathetic understanding. Noone & Jenkins (2017), for instance, used vignettes to present interview data collected from people with dementia who participated in a community gardening project in the context of the individuals' wider life stories, to communicate the significance of the participants' reflections in relation to their lived experiences of dementia.

Given such affordances, the vignette technique as an analytical-representational strategy has been particularly suited to researchers working within participatory and action-orientated research designs (e.g. Spalding, 2004; Spalding & Phillips, 2007) as well as amongst postcolonial researchers seeking to advance 'indigenous methodologies' and 'de/colonizing epistemologies' (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2007; Langer, 2016).

Ely et al., (1997) identify three distinct forms of analytical-representational vignette: *portrait*, *snapshot* and *moving*. *Portrait* vignettes involve the researcher representing a particular participant or actor by providing insight into the actor's inner world and subjective experience. This may be achieved by the researcher drawing on literary or other artistic techniques in order to cultivate, through *vicarious introspection*, a sense of what it feels like be a particular agent within a particular social and cultural setting. This, Ely et al. argue, can be particularly effective in providing a *voice* for research participants who may not be able to communicate their experiences via more conventional data collection methods. Snapshot vignettes, on the other hand, provide '*a contextualised single picture … intended to represent an entire issue, phenomenon, or case' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 74)*. Such representations may be literal, referring to specific events that took place during the period of research, as well as figurative, drawing upon metaphorical and symbolic forms of representation in the same way that '*writers often use, for example, a wave to stand for the ocean or the North star to stand for a galaxy'* (Ely et al., 1997, p. 74). In contrast to snapshot vignettes, moving vignettes are characterized by the representation of '*a flow of events over time' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 74)* and are thus particularly suited to highlighting the evolving nature of lived experience. Although different types of vignette are identified, Ely et al. advocate not becoming overly concerned with the differences and boundaries between them, stating that '… *it's more important to use vignettes rather than worry about naming* them' (1997, p. 78).

When used from this tradition, the vignette technique has been effective in enabling researchers to position themselves within the research process and to communicate their own subjective experiences. Forbat and Henderson (2003) for example, developed a figurative snapshot vignette in order to contextualise some of the practical and ethical challenges they experienced when seeking to conduct triadic qualitative interviews with participants who were involved in caring relationships. In so doing, Forbat and Henderson utilised the vignette technique in order to highlight '*the researcher's position of being stuck in the middle of two people in a relationship' (2003, p. 1454)*. DeLuca and Maddox use the vignette technique in similar vein, highlighting how they were '*struggling with guilt and wrestling with [their] privileged selves' (2016, p. 285)* during their ethnographic research projects.

Figure 4: Example of the vignette technique in autoethnography

Opportunity Knocks

This is really scary! What am I doing here? Why did I agree to present this paper? I am not an academic, I'm a teacher! Look at all those people in the audience … there's Andrew sitting next to Mary Jo … why did THEY have to come? I'm going to let them down, they're going to be really embarrassed at

being associated with me as coauthors. The other two presenters look really confident, as have all the people I've seen do presentations in the last few days. I really shouldn't be here, I'm out of place, I'm not in their league. My God, some of the academics I've seen presenting papers are actually in the audience! Oh no, there are some of my new Nottingham colleagues coming in at the back of the room, what will they think when I freeze up and can't speak? I should have stayed in the U.K. and carried on working at Bolton, at least I was well respected there, small fish but in a very small pond; I feel like a minnow in a lake here, and there are some predatory-looking big fish around! OK, stay calm, I'm on my feet now, my dry mouth is subsiding, the script seems to be working, they are responding to me and laughing at my little jokes. This is going better than I could have expected, it's just like teaching a group of postgraduates, it actually feels alright, I am starting to get the familiar feeling of weightlessness and oneness with the group. People seem to be interested in what I am saying. They even want to hear more, everyone seems to want copies of the paper, they're thrusting business cards into my hand and asking questions that are giving me ideas for further work. This is a real buzz. Andrew and Jo smile encouragingly as they leave to give their own papers. I feel relieved but exhausted.

Source: Humphreys (2005, p. 846)

A central methodological consideration when using vignettes to analyse and represent qualitative data is that of *validity*. In other words, to what extent can such vignettes be considered truthful or accurate representations of the phenomenon under investigation? In addressing this question, Spalding and Phillips (2007) highlight the potential for researchers to base their evaluations of vignettes on the notion of *trustworthiness* as opposed to *validity*. Evaluations of trustworthiness, they argue, may be obtained through inviting participants to provide their own evaluations of the vignettes; for example, by asking participants to reflect on the extent to which they believe the vignettes speak to the primary themes and issues impacting upon their lives. An alternative approach may be to focus on the extent to which vignettes *diffract* (as opposed to reflect) the lived realities of research participants (Barad, 2007). This approach assumes that vignettes are inseparably entangled with the realities they seek to represent. Thus, rather than evaluating vignettes according to their ability to offer-up a mirrored reflection of that reality, it may be more appropriate for researchers working within this tradition to evaluate the extent to which vignettes create '*interference patterns'* (Haraway, 1997, p. 16) that isolate, problematize, challenge or otherwise disrupt key aspects of social life (such as relationships to power) in order to create new possibilities for action. Such an approach speaks to Langer's (2016) emphasis on the potential for vignettes to create 'disturbances' in the social world.

Summary

As Rossi (1979, p. 185, cited in Wallander 2009, p. 517) states, '*it will be some time before the vignette technique becomes entrenched as a common tool in social research'*. However, approximately four decades following its early articulations, the vignette technique has developed into a highly versatile and important aspect of the contemporary social researcher's toolkit. The ways in which vignettes are created, deployed and evaluated within the research process, however, are contingent upon the research designs and traditions within which the researcher is working. Far from detracting from the effectiveness of the method overall, the continued use of the vignette technique across the broad spectrum of contemporary social research practice is likely to lead to further developments and to exciting, interdisciplinary innovations in the years and decades to come.

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